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THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF INTELLECTUAL LIBERTY,

IN A LETTER TO

SIR GEORGE SAVILE, Bart.

OCCASIONED BY

AN ERROR ON A FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE

OF

LEGISLATION,

SUPPORTED BY HIS CREDIT AND ELOQUENCE,
IN THE DEBATE ON THE

DISSENTING BILL,

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17, 1779.

BY THE REV. DAVID WILLIAMS.

Magna vis & magnum nomen, sunt unum & idem.

LONDON, PRINTED FOR
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MDCCLXXIX.

TO

SIR GEORGE SAVILE, Bart.

SIR,

ACCUSTOMED, as I have been from my earlieſt youth, to contemn difficulties and defy power, I feel an apprehenſion in addreſſing you: and it is the reſpect I owe to virtue—I mean not that which regulates your manners; it has its full commendation: but that which actuates your public conduct, which can never be ſufficiently commended.

I have heard of you, as among the very few members of our preſent legiſlature, who view laws in their principles; and

who ſtudy human nature, in order to aſſiſt in regulating the conduct of men. It ſeems likely, that you will be ſoon ſingular in this ſtudy. Parliament is at this time evidently controuled by Weſtminſter-Hall; and ſenators have loſt their character of political philoſophers. They deſcend to quibbling conteſts with men, whoſe profeſſion incapacitates them for legiſlation, and whoſe practice is wrangling. A perſon trained up in this profeſſion, and deſtitute of the ſervility generally impreſſed on thoſe who riſe from inferior ſtations, is now documenting the Houſe of Lords, as if it were a ſchool, or keeping it ſtrictly to the forms of a court. In proportion as this influence prevails, you will be like children furniſhed by pedants with bladders to float upon; you will never venture out of ſight; and you will never learn to ſwim. It is the ſcience of principles; it is political philoſophy, and not law, which ſhould be the

ſtudy

ſtudy of a ſenator: the former is the miſtreſs of human genius; the latter is its ſervile and mechanical inſtrument.*

I was informed of the deſign of bringing in the diſſenting bill, but three days before the debate, which is the occaſion of this letter. As a religious body, I think the diſſenters, of no account.† As intolerant in all their public actions, I deteſt them. As the rock on which deſpotiſm has ſplit

* Lord Chatham, whoſe underſtanding, I ſincerely think, to have been inferior to that of Sir G. Savile, and whoſe integrity was much more queſtionable, ſeems to have been among the laſt of the old genuine Britiſh legiſlators. There was not a lawyer in the world who would have faced him.

† This reflection on the diſſenters is not meant to glance on individuals among them, whom the author knows to be real friends to liberty. But the diſſenters, as a body, have never been friends to the freedom of the human mind. They have only wiſhed themſelves at liberty.

itſelf in all its great attempts, ſince the reign of Harry the Eighth, I reſpect them.

Six years ago, Sir Harry Houghton brought in a bill in the name of the diſſenters; the object of which was, not the natural independence and freedom of the human underſtanding; but the ſecurity and eſtabliſhment of thoſe miniſters, among the diſſenters, who were of a certain belief. I had reaſon, therefore, to apprehend, that the preſent bill would be brought in with the ſame illiberal and intolerant views. I thought I owed it to that liberty, which I have ever regarded with enthuſiaſm, to throw every obſtacle, I could, in the way of the bill. This was my purpoſe in writing a letter to thoſe gentlemen,* whom I

* Sir George Savile, Sir Henry Houghton, Right Hon. Col. Barré, Hon. Charles Fox, James Harris, Eſq. Edmund Burke, Eſq. and John Wilkes, Eſq.

thought

thought moſt likely to ſpeak in favour of the diſſenters.

As this letter has been attributed to apprehenſions and views, which I could not have entertained; and I am informed, that a teſt will be propoſed in the Houſe of Lords, to limit enquirers in the liberty of declaring their opinions, I think it neceſſary to inſert a copy of the letter; after having obſerved, that a perſon in my ſituation, who has dropped all the diſtinctions of religious ſects, and introduced a ſervice on thoſe principles, which are acknowledged by all the world, muſt be unacquainted with the nature and object of our eccleſiaſtical laws, to have any apprehenſions from them. I imagine, there are no laws in Europe againſt the profeſſion of atheiſm and deiſm; much leſs againſt the avowal of an attachment to principles meerly moral. It was never ſuppoſed, that men

would

would venture on ſuch enormities. And, if there be a general diſpoſition to theſe offences; and it be admitted by the friends of Chriſtianity, that it cannot bear a fair competition, they will be under a neceſſity either of having recourſe to arbitrary exertions of power, or of forming penal laws, ſuited to preſent exigences.

Copy of a Letter to Sir G. Savile, &c.

"SIR,

"The bill to be brought in on Wedneſday by Sir Harry Houghton, in behalf of the diſſenters, if it be the ſame with that brought in by him ſix years ago, and if it be carried through both Houſes, will be

* The firſt public profeſſor of deiſm, or atheiſm, muſt be conſidered by bigots, as the firſt man, who killed his father, was by the Greeks. The crimes were thought impoſſible; and the criminal muſt eſcape in the latter caſe, as in the former.

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injurious to truth and liberty, for the following reaſons.

"It is not a petition for liberty—it holds out a teſt, which being conſidered as a moderate one, all thoſe miniſters who do not, or cannot ſubſcribe to it, will be ſilenced or perſecuted.

"The penal laws againſt the diſſenters were deemed exceedingly ſevere; they were therefore neglected. The *teſt* included in this bill, or offered by it, being ſuch, as many of the diſſenting miniſters will ſubſcribe; and being *apparently* juſt, it will bring the penal laws into execution; and ſome of the moſt uſeful members of the community, *free-enquirers*, will be informed againſt and harraſſed. In this manner, what is apparently intended, to ſuppreſs the ſpirit of intolerance, will certainly revive it.

The

"The moſt honourable diſtinction of the diſſenters, has ever been the public avowal of a truth, which is the *firſt principle* of freedom, and of the utmoſt importance to morals and policy. That "opinions, true or falſe, are not to be enjoined by the magiſtrate; becauſe, being permitted to enjoin the belief of truth, he will claim a right to enjoin the belief of falſehood." This is the circumſtance which renders the diſſenters of importance to the community; and the advantages, from their having aſſerted this truth, which have ariſen to moral and political enquiries, and even to the ſciences, cannot be enumerated or eſtimated. If they are permitted to give up the principle; the leaſt conſequence will be, involving them in infamy; miſchiefs infinitely more important will ariſe.

"The ſcriptures are improperly made a teſt of faith, or a condition of liberty. It

is

is giving up their claim to divine authority, to impoſe them on any pretence; and there is no truth in geometry clearer, than that the propoſition, doctrine, or ſyſtem, which requires any ſpecies of violence to enforce it, is a falſehood. The Scriptures are at this time, and by the acknowledgment of the moſt learned Chriſtians, in a condition, which renders them unfit to be offered as a teſt. Dr. Kennicott has been aſſiſted by an enormous ſubſcription, and for many years, to remove interpolations; miſtakes of tranſcribers; and other imperfections of the Scriptures. The Bp. of London in his *Prelectiones*, and in his *Preliminary Diſſertation to the Tranſlation of Iſaiah*, acknowledges theſe imperfections. They are acknowledged by all the liberal enquirers into the ſtate of the Bible, who are well acquainted with its original languages.

" The diſſenters have particularly diſtinguiſhed themſelves in this way. They have entirely ſtruck out the Apocrypha from thoſe Bibles which are printed for them, and diſtributed in their congregations.

" The diviſion of them, which now appears as petitioners, and which is diſtinguiſhed by the name of Preſbyterian, generally diſcredit the Songs of Solomon; and ſome of them have diſputed the authenticity of important parts of the New Teſtament.

" It is impoſſible, therefore, that theſe perſons ſhould *honeſtly* ſubſcribe *the Bible which will be laid before them* by government. And if they are to have mental reſervations, they can have no grievances. For the man who ſubſcribes the *Bible of the church*, while he diſbelieves many parts of it, will not hurt

hurt his conſcience by ſubſcribing the *thirty-nine articles.*

" The petition of the diſſenters, as it was firſt intended to be offered, praying an abolition of the penal laws, and giving the fulleſt ſecurity for their allegiance, was a proper one; and if carried through, would have had beneficial conſequences.

" The preſent bill, if paſſed into a law including *any teſt of opinions* will relieve no man (for all the religious world is at peace or aſleep) it will revive malicious informations, diſputes, perſecutions, and impede the operations of a government which ſeems to be fully employed and embarraſſed.

" You may ſee in eſſays on public worſhip, &c. p. 48, printed for Kearſley, that I began early to oppoſe the bill. I know

how things are ſaid to be determined in Parliament, and that the voice of an angel would not be attended to, when meaſures are to be carried through, to ſerve particular purpoſes. But I am ſure you will conſider, Sir, that theſe things muſt be anſwered for to truth, virtue, religion, and poſterity.

I have the honor to be

Sir,

D. W."

Whether this letter had any effect in keeping the ſpeakers to the general queſtion of liberty, or not, is immaterial.

" It was decreed (I write now from the " ſybil's leaves) it was decreed, becauſe the " Roman Catholics had been favoured, and " might be further favoured, that ſome " ſhew of kindneſs ſhould be made to the " diſſenters. Prelates preached, and mini- " ſters gave hints; the bill on any plan

" was

" was ſuffered to go through the Houſe
" of Commons with a triumph of wit
" on the ſide of popular orators; the pi-
" ous and learned univerſity of Oxford,*
" at

* The univerſity of Oxford would be properly employed in actually furniſhing the youth of that ſeminary with principles and manners, which they ſay in their petition will be injured by liberty. The knowledge of languages, the loweſt object of human attainment, ſeems to be the great purpoſe of education there; and yet this town ſwarms with perſons who have had their education at that univerſity, and who cannot read or write tolerably in any language under heaven. It is the buſineſs of great numbers of perſons here, whom the univerſity might affect to deſpiſe, to *re-educate* thoſe who have been at Oxford, or to direct them in methods of obtaining knowledge. In phyſic it is now become a cuſtom for thoſe who are entered as ſtudents at Oxford, and who mean to have knowledge, actually to ſtudy at Edinburgh. In the mathematics, philoſophy, and aſtronomy, Oxford is probably far behind the other univerſities of Europe. The author of this letter paſſing through that city three years ago, ſaw an obſervatory which had been built at a great expence; but in ſuch a manner

" at the head of which was a pious and " learned prime miniſter, petitioned againſt " it. The biſhops propoſed a teſt; the " diſſenters could not agree upon one, and " the bill was loſt." This looks like an authentic prophecy concerning the fate of the bill.

But not to inſiſt on this matter. In the debate on the diſſenting bill, I was more attentive to the abilities of our legiſlators, than concerned for the determination of the Houſe. I ſaid to myſelf, 'Parliament of late have been abundantly

ner as to furniſh a public proof, there could have been no man in the univerſity of conſequence enough to be conſulted, who underſtood the uſe of an obſervatory. What he would infer from theſe and other circumſtances he could mention, is—that the univerſity ſhould firſt render its own inſtitutions effectual for the uſe and benefit of youth; and then it might with more decency interfere in the buſineſs of the legiſlature.

'occupied in contending for the limbs and 'branches of the conſtitution; they are 'now approaching the roots.' I need not tell you, Sir, though the Diſſenters may not weigh much as a body in the determination of national queſtions, that the principle on which they have been tolerated, is a firſt principle * in the Engliſh conſtitution; and perhaps as important as any which can be pointed out in it. I expected to have had it treated as ſuch; and in proportion as philoſophy is ſaid to have improved us, ſince the days

* The great principles which diſtinguiſh the Engliſh conſtitution, are the following:

The power of Parliament to grant and fix ſubſidies;

Trial by juries;

The act of Habeas Corpus;

And the liberty of thinking, ſpeaking, and writing.

The toleration of the diſſenters is intimately connected with the latter; and perhaps it was their ſtruggle to procure toleration which produced it.

of

of Mr. Locke, I hoped to find the luſtre of his opinions obſcured.

I ſhould admire the talents of Mr. Fox in a comedy or a ſatire, and thoſe of Mr. Burke in Theſes for a prize; but the eloquence of the ſenate ſhould condeſcend but very ſeldom, and very ſparingly, to ſcatter the choiceſt flowers of rhetoric and wit. You alone, Sir, touched on principles of legiſlation; and if you had ſucceeded, you would not have been troubled with this letter.

You ſtood up in favour of liberty; and you ſtated that eternal axiom on which it reſts—*that opinions muſt be free, and actions only can be limited.* This is the definition; and this points out the nature and extent of intellectual liberty. The general principle has been admitted, by all liberal writers on the ſubject,

ject, as it was by you, on the debate to which I refer. But moſt of them have rendered it ineffectual, as you alſo did, when diſtinguiſhing between opinions and overt-acts.

Thoughts and opinions which are deſigned to be of uſe to us *in this world*, originate from the ſenſes, and are the produce of the body. They form in time a *moral mind*, which though the effect of matter, is itſelf impalpable and immaterial. Theſe thoughts and opinions, when formed and fixed, from having been effects become cauſes, and uſe the conſtitution which occaſioned them, as their inſtrument. In the firſt part of this proceſs, the human conſtitution muſt be at perfect liberty; for there is no power on earth, that can pretend to a ſhadow of a right to interfere with it: in the latter, which is called action, it muſt be

limited by truth and falſhood, right and wrong, and other circumſtances which may be deemed the intereſts of particular ſocieties.

But metaphyſicians, moraliſts, politicians, and poets have perſonified even this mind, and diſtinguiſhed it from the body, of which it is an acknowledged effect: and they have abſurdly reaſoned by analogy—that, as the body is ſubject to limitations from truth, virtue, and the intereſts of ſociety, ſo ſhould the mind.*

There

* I would wiſh to be conſidered as keeping clear of a modern controverſy on matter and ſpirit. It may be eaſily perceived, that I am a diſciple of the ſchool of Hartley; to whoſe work I acknowledge myſelf indebted for all the aſſiſtance I ever received, from reading, in tracing the origin and principles of real knowledge. I have not even ſeen the edition of this work given by Dr. Prieſtley; nor do I know a reaſon that could juſtify its being given ſo different from that which was publiſhed

There is not one circumſtance, on which it is poſſible for a poet, to form an analogy between the body, and the thoughts and opinions which are produced in us by experience, and which cannot be cognizable until they appear in the actions of that body.

All the plauſible arguments which I have ever heard of in favour of intolerance of opinions, except thoſe I heard from you, have ariſen from this analogy.

bliſhed by Dr. Hartley himſelf. The controverſy which has ariſen on a deduction of Dr. Prieſtley's from Dr. Hartley's principles at firſt excited my curioſity. But it is ſwollen into volumes too large for me. And though I greatly reſpect the abilities of Kenrick, Prieſtley, Price, and other combatants in this obſcure and duſty field; human life is too ſhort to attend to ſuch engagements, when they do not lie directly in a man's road. It cannot ſignify to any of my purpoſes, whether the iſſue be, that matter occupies the univerſe; or that it is ſpirit; or that it is neither matter nor ſpirit.

From the very nature of opinions and thoughts, as above deſcribed, *all or none of them muſt be free*; for no reſtraint can be applied which will not deſtroy the power of thinking.*

You

* Thoſe who may not comprehend the force of metaphyſical arguments, may perceive the abſurdity of reſtraining thoughts and opinions, by the following ſtory.

" Here, (ſaid Sancho, in regard to a young man " who was brought before him) take and carry him " to a gaol, I will take order that he ſhall ſleep " for one night without air. 'Fore God! cried " the youth, your honour can no more make me " ſleep in gaol, than you can make me king. And " wherefore cannot I make thee ſleep in gaol? re- " plied Sancho; is it not in my power to confine " and releaſe thee, when and where I pleaſe? How " great ſoever your honor's power may be, ſaid the " young man, it is not ſufficient to make me ſleep " in priſon. How! not ſufficient! cried Sancho; " away with him, and let his own eyes convince " him of his miſtake; and leſt the gaoler ſhould " practiſe his intereſted generoſity upon him, I will " fine

You allowed this in general terms, but made ſome exceptions; daſhing to atoms with one hand what you had held up with the other.

You

" fine him in two thouſand ducats if he ſuffers thee " to move one ſtep from the priſon. All this is " matter of mirth, anſwered the youth; for the " truth is, all the people upon earth ſhall not " make me ſleep in priſon. Tell me, devil, ſaid " Sancho, haſt thou got a familiar to releaſe thee, " and looſe the chains with which I intend thou " ſhalt be fettered? Now, my Lord Governor, " replied the youth with a graceful air, let us ar- " gue the matter, and come to the point. Sup- " poſe your excellency ſhould order me to be car- " ried to gaol, to be loaded with chains and " ſhackles, and thruſt into a dungeon; and lay " an heavy penalty upon a jailor in caſe he ſhould " allow me to eſcape; and laſtly, ſuppoſe he " ſhould perform his duty with all imaginable " care and ſucceſs; notwithſtanding all theſe pre- " cautions, if I have no inclination to ſleep, and " can keep myſelf awake all night, without cloſ- " ing my eyes, pray tell me, is all your Lord- " ſhip's power ſufficient to make me ſleep againſt " my will? No ſurely, ſaid the ſecretary; and

the

You ſaid, there were ſome opinions and thoughts which could not be tolerated, and inſtanced thoſe of a right to murder or to plunder.*

" the young man has made good his aſſertion. " Provided always, ſaid Sancho, that your defying " ſleep would be merely for your own pleaſure, " without any intention to contradict me. No, " my Lord, replied the youth, I never dreamt of " any ſuch intention."

* Voltaire, who, as a moral and political philoſopher, was one of the maſters of municipal and territorial legiſlatures, and in common with a Locke, a Monteſquieu, an Helvetius, &c. was a member of the parliament of the univerſe, was not free from this error. In his treatiſe on toleration, he has a chapter on the caſes in which opinions are not to be tolerated. When I declare to Sir George Savile that I think this book did more honour to its author than any thing which has been publiſhed by any man for many centuries——he will not think himſelf injured, if I ſay, its character is that of Sir George's ſpeech on liberty. It has eloquence; it has wit; it has the moſt ſeducing hints on expediency; but wanting that conſiſtency which is ever given by truly philoſophical principles, it furniſhes arguments againſt the very cauſe it would ſerve.

I will

I will not avail myſelf of an inaccuracy in your ſentiments, though it be a matter of the utmoſt importance that you ſhould *reaſon well*, whenever you ſpeak on the principles of the conſtitution. I might ſay, how are thoſe murderous *thoughts*, &c. to be reſtrained? The impoſſibility of applying any reſtraints to any thoughts, makes the queſtion ridiculous, and proves, that thoughts and opinions are not objects of toleration; but the *declaration* and *avowal* of them. And I will join iſſue with you, taking the infinite odds of your character and reputation againſt mine, that all men ſhould be at liberty to *declare all* their principles and opinions; and that every act which reſtrains that liberty is tyrannical, and injurious to a ſtate, which is inſtituted for public happineſs.

The queſtion is not concerning thoughts; for they muſt be free; it is not concerning actions, for they muſt be limited: but concerning an intermediate matter, which is the declaration and avowal of thoughts and opinions.

And here I will have recourſe to analogy; for I can form it; and it will be to illuſtrate, not to deceive.

A community once formed, is in almoſt every poſſible circumſtance analogous to an individual: it is particularly ſo in its method of acquiring public opinions and public thoughts. It is by the experience of individuals, like the effects of ſenſation, that all the materials of ſocial and political knowledge are to be acquired. How is this experience to be known, but by the avowal of all their ſentiments, good, indifferent, and bad? The community which reſtrains this

this avowal, is like the man, who ſhuts up ſome of his ſenſes, and leſſens his capacity of knowledge and enjoyment.

It is ignorance of the conſtitution of human nature, which induces government to direct its reſtraints, or even its attention, where it has no power, and can produce no good or certain effect. The characters of men, and the uſe or injury they are of, are not owing to their opinions, until thoſe opinions operate in actions, and produce habits and cuſtoms. It is to actions, and to the formation of habits, that government ſhould attend; and there it is almoſt almighty; for it can transform men into brutes, and brutes into men, at pleaſure.*

* The univerſity of Oxford, if it had profited by experience, would have been ſo effectually convinced of this truth, as to be aſhamed to interfere in favour of intolerance. The world may be appealed to, whether the youth of Oxford have their characters

But I will not keep you long in the region of principles; for we ſhall be out of the ſight of many of your aſſociates, who ſeem to be more converſant with hiſtorians, lawyers, and poets, than thoſe writers, who diſtinguiſh the little truth there is in the world, from the deceptions and falſehood with which it is filled. We muſt, therefore, deſcend to facts. And I ſhall mention only a few obvious ones.

The Roman Catholics hold an opinion, that it is their duty to kill thoſe princes, magiſtrates, and people, who either perſecute, or deſert the faith of the church.

ters formed by the doctrines and principles to which they ſubſcribe, or by the cuſtoms and manners of the place? But it is the property of ignorance to graſp at more power than it can uſe, and to neglect its direct and immediate duties. Every ſeminary, every community, which aims to regulate thoughts, or even the avowal of them, muſt be extremely ignorant of human nature, which is not ſuſceptible of management, but in its habits and actions.

They

They ſhould be allowed to declare this opinion; they have a right to avow it in every community under heaven: it is of advantage to the magiſtrate, that this, as well as every other opinion, ſhould be avowed; for he would then be better prepared for the only buſineſs he can execute, and the only buſineſs he ſhould attempt, the regulation of outward actions. The truth of this is evident; for no inconvenience ariſes from the fulleſt toleration of the Roman Catholics in Pruſſia, Holland, Ireland, and particularly in America.

But to come to facts, which muſt carry conviction to every man. All criminal laws ſuppoſe there are great numbers of people in every community, who are firmly of opinion, that they may rob, plunder, and murder their neighbours, to obtain their property.

I ſuppoſe, it is known to a certain magiſtrate, that there are numerous ſeminaries in this town, where the principles of robbery and murder are taught with great care and pains. Who will ſay, that opinions in theſe inſtitutions on juſtice, &c. and the expreſs declaration of them, are not to be tolerated? The magiſtrate ſhould encourage this declaration, which he could not, durſt not puniſh; but the effects of which he might be prepared for. The haunts of almoſt all the conſiderable gangs which infeſt London, are known at a public office; but if the people are found aſſembled and mute, they may poſſibly be puniſhed on the vagrant act; but not on the *act of uniformity in opinions*; the *five-mile act*; or any other, which may affect religious and philoſophical liberty.

Every ſtate, therefore, tolerates opinions, and the avowal of opinions, that men may

ſteal

ſteal, plunder, and murder: and the moſt deſpotic in the world would ſhudder at the thoughts of extending its controul, in thoſe caſes, beyond outward actions.

In the caſe of perjury. Let us ſuppoſe, that a ſeminary ſhould decide by its principles, laws, and conduct, that a ſervile ſubmiſſion to power, and a ſelfiſh regard to intereſt, were to make truth, honour, and virtue, give way on all occaſions; and that the pupils of the inſtitution were to be led into theſe ſentiments both by leſſons and diſcipline—Who will ſay, that the profeſſors of ſuch an univerſity, and the teachers of ſuch doctrines, are not to be tolerated? Nay, what danger can ariſe to the church, or to the ſtate, if ſuch perſons were to fill up even the moſt ſacred and moſt important offices?

It is well known, that when our youth have finiſhed their arduous ſtudies at the univerſity, they are matriculated in nocturnal ſeminaries in this town. The principles and leſſons taught in them, and by the moſt irreſiſtible eloquence, lead to the commiſſion of the moſt atrocious crimes. For if there be a crime in nature, it is that of ſeducing innocence; alienating the affections of thoſe who are united in domeſtic felicity; and entailing diſhonour and miſery on families. If the legiſlature be really apprehenſive for the principles and manners of youth, and imagine, that the opinions of thoſe who *educate* them, ſhould be regulated by teſts—why not offer teſts to the principals of theſe ſeminaries? Sir, it would ſet the doctrine of intellectual reſtraint and intolerance in its true point of ridicule, if we could ſee the abbeſſes of certain inſtitutions of the utmoſt importance, to

the

the *education* of youth, gravely ſubſcribing *teſts of their religious and moral principles.*

No poſſible caſe of religious and philoſophical liberty, can be extended beyond thoſe caſes I have pointed out, of *criminal* liberty.

It appears to me, therefore, that a ſtate intending to receive all the information it wants, inſtead of reſtraining, ſhould encourage the public declaration and preaching of all principles and opinions. It is a common practice with the King of Pruſſia, to order paſquinades, on his perſon and government, to be taken down for his peruſal, and he never fails to put them up again.

I do not ſee, why thieves ſhould not be allowed to preach the principles of theft; murderers of murder; ſeducers of ſeduction;

tion; adulterers of adultery; and traitors of treaſon. If any man be ſo weak, as to think, that advantages would ariſe to iniquity from it, he cannot be benefited by any reaſoning which can be offered him.

The principles of truth, whether moral or political, like thoſe of the mathematics, are either ſelf-evident, or to be deduced from thoſe which are ſelf-evident. What man of ſcience would be alarmed at any number of perſons, who ſhould preach againſt mathematical truths! And are they better ſupported, than thoſe of religion, morality, and policy? Thoſe perſons who have the leaſt apprehenſion, from the moſt unlimited liberty, to controvert and oppoſe the latter, muſt believe they are.*

If

* A young gentleman, in the ſame claſs with the author, under a mathematical tutor, publicly controverted, and denied the poſſibility, that three angles of a triangle ſhould be equal to two right ones. He wrote

If the ſtate may take any coercive meaſures in regard to opinions, it ſhould be to oblige all men to declare them; by aſſociating, or aſſembling, on their religious moral, political, philoſophic, and even criminal ſentiments. Laws ſhould alſo be made to prevent, or puniſh, the intolerance of ſects. Gelon made war on the Carthaginians, to oblige them to forbear human ſacrifices. Elizabeth ſent an army into the Netherlands, with a view to induce the Spaniards to allow liberty of conſcience to the Dutch. Catherine II. of Ruſſia, ſent

wrote and ſpoke on the ſubject nearly in the ſtrain of Don Quixote. He was always attended to with perfect good humour and great candour; no man diſcovered the leaſt apprehenſion of danger to truth from his oppoſition; nay, every one appeared to be ready to give up the problem, if any thing really defective had been diſcovered in the demonſtration. The principals of the inſtitution are not, however, to be conſidered as indifferent concerning doctrines and truth: for if he had diſputed the doctrine of the Trinity, or of original ſin, he would have been expelled.

an army into Poland, to oblige the Poles, to tolerate the diſſidents. Theſe are hints for enterprizes and laws; for they are directly in favour of humanity.

I will not go over the old ground on which liberty has been maintained—the introduction of chriſtianity, the reformation, &c.—This has been quitted for the ſmall ſpot which you and ſome others occupy: and from which alone, in all probability, any attempts will be made to reſtrain it.

The buſineſs of government cannot poſſibly be with any thing but outward actions; and theſe might give it ſufficient employment. It has been long occupied in tendering creeds and teſts to form hypocrites and bad citizens. It has now *occaſions for virtues*; and it might form them by only making it the intereſt of men

men to be virtuous. The calamities which we are deploring, and looking forward to with gloomy concern, are not to be averted by the meaſures of monks and bigots; but by the conciliatory means of a philoſophic temper—by diffuſing a diſpoſition to concord and unanimity; and by exciting the dormant virtues of national honour and public ſpirit.

Theſe ſentiments have occurred to me, Sir, on attending to the ſteps which have been taken on the diſſenting bill. If they ſhould be important enough to deſerve your conſideration, they will that of the public. If not—the publication of them will furniſh one argument in favour of the liberty of ſpeaking and writing; it will ſhew, of how little conſequence it is, that an author ſhould write abſurdities.

I can hardly think, it was ever in the intention of adminiſtration to allow the diſſenters an unlimited liberty of thinking and preaching. You may perceive there lies, even in your breaſt, a prepoſſeſſion againſt this liberty. The univerſity of Oxford avow ſtronger objections than yours. And it is to be ſuppoſed that the Houſe of Lords is not free from the ſame prepoſſeſſions. It is on theſe principles, that a teſt will be inſiſted upon: and if the bill paſs with any teſt, it will be the immediate inſtrument of oppreſſions and confuſion.

This is a matter of conſideration, even with regard to the diſſenters, But the legiſlature of Great Britain is to look much further, than to the peace and intereſt of the diſſenters. The characteriſtic liberty of the Engliſh nation has been principally owing to the diſuſe into which

which oppreſſive laws have fallen, by means of the act of toleration. For when bigotry and oppreſſion could not exerciſe their rage on the diſſenters, they ſuffered liberty to rear her head in *morality*; and conſequently in politics, in the ſciences, and in the arts.

If at this time, the legiſlature ſhould paſs the diſſenting bill with *any teſt* of opinions in it:—the act will diſhonour the abilities and talents of the nation more than any thing which has ariſen in the diſunion of its parts; and the bloodſhed and miſeries of a civil war. For theſe things will ſoon be terminated; and probably to the general benefit of the world. But determinations on univerſal principles of legiſlature, in the parliament of Great Britain, the ſchool of political

political wiſdom to mankind, will have conſequences of vaſt extent and great duration.

Does not every Engliſhman ſee with pride, that thoſe philoſophers who are the great inſtructors of mankind, are pointing from every corner of the earth to the determinations of this aſſembly, as to the oracles of wiſdom; and that the improvements which are gradually made in other governments, are in conſequence of experiments made here? Do not let us loſe this flattering, this beneficial diſtinction! Wiſdom does not always fly with virtue; and while her future habitation is diſputed, ſhe may give us many of her leſſons.

The whole world is intereſted in this queſtion; for it is on an univerſal principle

ciple of legiſlation. From Kamtſkatka to the banks of the Ohio, its influence will be felt. Let the remaining chains of liberty be broken—ſhe will ſkim over the dreary regions of Ruſſia, and illumine with additional rays the noble mind of its Empreſs; and, after having cheared the Poliſh diſſident in his dungeon, ſhe will lay her hand on the hoary head of the Pruſſian monarch, bleſs his remaining days; and only regret ſhe could not fully ſhew herſelf to him ſooner: ſhe will touch the heart of a youth in Sweden; and find acceſs even at Vienna; and after rejoicing with her hardy children in Switzerland, and dropping a tear on an urn at Ferney, ſhe will paſs through France into America; diſſolve the vindictive rancour of its ſectaries, who could oppoſe the *leſſons* of the parent ſtate to the

the *example* of one of its children—and she will take her residence—if permitted —in her native land.

I have the honor to be,

with the greatest Respect,

Sir,

Your most humble Servant,

DAVID WILLIAMS.

Meard-Street, Soho.

April 5th, 1779.